



TRANSFORMING MINDSETS, POWERING CHANGE

# Recognizing Catalysts for Change in Postsecondary Education

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# INTRODUCTION

In our evaluation of Talent Hubs, stakeholders often drew our attention to individuals who played an **outsized role in catalyzing equitable change within and across partner organizations**. They are not necessarily executive leaders; in fact, their contributions can be hard to see or recognize without a deep understanding of the complexity of institutional change efforts. Current programmatic and human resource structures are not often set up to acknowledge the individuals who balance day-to-day responsibilities with powerful—and sometimes subtle—strategies that fuel collaboration and contribute to system-level shifts.

In this series, we call these individuals “Catalysts.”

While the role of Catalysts in postsecondary change efforts around the country varies, the scaffolding they provide includes:

- Identifying tasks and tactics that contribute to broader equity policies and practices.
- Building relationships across postsecondary stakeholders to leverage collective assets, resources, and strengths.
- Supporting and empowering others in designing new ways of working and setting in motion the establishment of new norms.
- Embracing a “student first” orientation and supporting strategies to remove barriers to student success and to focus on the needs and aspirations of students rather than just those of the institution and its staff.

Catalysts in equity-focused postsecondary efforts thrive and are most effective when they have trust and autonomy from leaders, and can be creative in planning and supporting change strategies within their spheres of influence: departments, programs, institutions, or with partners across sectors. Their activities may have an impact at different levels—on students and communities, across departments in an institution, or among local partners.

In this report, we will:

1. Introduce readers to three Catalysts and the passion, skills, and experiences helping them advance equity-focused and collaborative work.
2. Deepen the field’s understanding of individuals who move beyond their official responsibilities to serve as guides, connectors, and motivators for change.
3. Highlight common characteristics, strategies, and tactics of Catalysts with the goal of helping postsecondary partnerships identify, recognize, and support *their own* Catalysts.



## TRANSFORMING MINDSETS, POWERING CHANGE SERIES

### Evaluation Approach

This report is part of a series, *Transforming Mindsets, Powering Change*, in which we share learnings related to advancing equity through policy and practice change. Equal Measure served as Lumina Foundation's evaluation and learning partner for Talent Hubs from 2017-2021. These products are the culmination of 70 interviews with Talent Hub partners and a survey documenting 240 policy and practice changes underway at 22 Talent Hubs. Six types of partner organizations were involved in interviews: postsecondary institutions (40); community organizations, including nonprofits and chambers, some serving as the Talent Hub grantee (22); government (3); philanthropy (3); workforce/employers (2). Interviews were conducted with postsecondary institution presidents, provosts, deans, and department heads, students, and leaders from local government, business, and community-based organizations.

We invite you to read the two companion reports in this series:

- *Advancing Equity through Postsecondary Education Policy and Practice*, which provides an emerging picture of how postsecondary institutions and their partners are unearthing complex and entrenched barriers embedded in their systems and shifting culture, practices, and policies.
- *Getting to the Root*, which presents four approaches to exploring the root causes of inequity and elevates the stories of three Talent Hubs who used findings from their own explorations to drive community- and institutional-level change.



# INTRODUCING THE CATALYSTS

The Catalysts we profile here were credited by their peers and colleagues for helping pave the way for policy and practice change. They were recognized for their ability to motivate partners, tackle roadblocks, and lead the way in grounding efforts in shared approaches in equity. These three Catalysts orchestrated change from their own unique vantage points—as a regional intermediary, within a community college program office, and as student services director in a university system.

## Kathy Huffman

**Director of Employer Engagement, Community Education Coalition, EcO Network**



KATHY HUFFMAN, COLUMBUS, IN

*“The next step keeps me going. We’ve come a long way, implemented bold strategies across the learning system, but there’s always the next best thing. It is my desire for a new challenge, a new problem to solve, new relationships to build; even the deliberations among partners on how best to address a challenge entice me to keep going.”*

Kathy Huffman is Director of Employment Engagement at EcO Network in Columbus, IN, a partnership of education, business, and community leaders focused on aligning the region’s community learning system, economic growth and a high quality of life, and a shared commitment to supporting Latinx and low-income adult students facing systemic barriers. Partners in the Network develop and maintain pathways across the participating institutions for employees and students to achieve employer-recognized credentials and begin to “ladder up” in their careers. Their aim is to make industry-recognized certifications recognizable as the first stackable credential in earning a degree that leads to family-sustaining wages, career ladders, and locally in-demand jobs.

When the mapping efforts began, Kathy understood there was critical information scattered across the region’s postsecondary systems from the Department of Workforce Development, industries and employers in the region, postsecondary institutions, adult education programs, and many other places. Students, advisors, and even employers did not have clear, easy-to-use information about the credits and credentials that translate into college credit and career advancement. Her first effort was to bring many partners and their information together. She recalls, “We would basically lock ourselves in a room for four or five hours at a time and dig through different websites, different manuals, curriculum guides, and job projections from the Department of Workforce Development, and just piece it together one little section at a time.”



Eventually, Kathy and her colleagues coordinated information from workforce entities, community colleges, and adult education programs. Their work built upon the existing internal training and certification crosswalk—an underutilized tool that the local community college created to articulate which certifications count toward college credit. The broader partnership developed the [Powerhouse Credential Crosswalk](#), a tool that combines curriculum guides, job projection data, and a credentials map to direct students toward 25 industry certifications offered by local educational institutions that lead to high-demand, family-sustaining jobs with local employers. The co-development process helped accelerate understanding within each partner institution to ensure the tool is used and benefiting students. The Crosswalk is updated every two years to keep pace with workforce and educational trends.

As they developed the tool, Kathy’s work with the partners helped illuminate other gaps in the system. For example, they discovered local institutions did not consistently offer training for in-demand jobs in the region, prompting new opportunities for educational partners to update their training and credential programs. They also helped community colleges recognize credentials as college credit, and partner with adult education programs to encourage students earning certifications and credentials to pursue an associate degree. For rural institutions that struggle to attract new students, connections with adult education providers have contributed to accelerated enrollments. Ultimately, this work is helping adult students—especially those from low-income, rural, and Latinx communities—build a bridge from credentials, to college, to family-sustaining careers.

In a recent interview, Kathy Huffman offered an inside view of her approach to catalyzing change and the life experiences that undergird her passion.

#### **How do your life experiences inform your work?**

“Growing up on a small farm in northern Indiana there was always work to be done. The work was shared across our family and often with neighbors. This instilled in me a strong work ethic, both in myself and in the value of teamwork. It also taught me I was capable of way more than I thought. Pushing yourself when you are tired builds grit and resiliency that sticks with you for life. This contributed to my own belief system that when taking on a challenge you simply do the work, ask for help because many hands make light work, don’t complain, obstacles can be overcome, respect all perspectives, look for solutions, and just get it done.”

#### **What are the hidden or subtle signs of progress you’ve experienced in your work, even when it feels slow or difficult?**

“The speed of collaboration is a strange thing. It is slow at the beginning, and feels like you’re spinning your wheels, getting nowhere. Once you put in the hard work of identifying the challenge, bringing stakeholders together, and understanding the system as it currently exists, that’s when the wheels of the work take hold and you begin making progress at a much faster pace.

“One of the most subtle signs of progress, I think, is that partners continue to come to the table and the relationships over many years are still strong; they are relational, not transactional.

“What is often unseen is that partners can reach consensus on strategies, even when some of the partners won’t benefit directly from the set of strategies being implemented. By working together, supporting each other, they know there will be a next time when the shared strategies will more directly benefit them. We have implemented multiple strategies across five postsecondary campuses and with three adult education providers, and all of them are focused on increased educational attainment, especially for low-income and/or Latinx adults.”

#### **What keeps you going?**

“The next step keeps me going. We’ve come a long way, implemented bold strategies across the learning system, but there’s always the next best thing. It is my desire for a new challenge, a new problem to solve, new relationships to build; even the deliberations among partners on how best to address a challenge entice me to keep going.”



## Fred Frazier

Student Success Advisor, Nashville State Community College



FRED FRAZIER, NASHVILLE, TN

*“There are also the personal connections with adult students that are essential in this work. When I am approached with the challenges or conflicts students experience –be they decisions about majors or issues with childcare—there is a lot of time spent listening and asking questions. At some point, I will ask, ‘What does your heart tell you?’ and we begin to map out options from there.”*

When Fred Frazier was at the Nashville Chamber of Commerce and Middle Tennessee Reconnect Community, he helped develop an idea to support adults returning to postsecondary education. Nashville State Community College saw potential in both the program and in Fred. They hired him to set up a Reconnect Café on their campus, encouraging him to make it his own from inception onward.

Fred’s success working with adult students through the Chamber and his many years in military service before then, made him the obvious choice for the role, according to colleagues. He understood the issues students face in returning to school—including academic, family, and financial challenges—and was empowered to shape the Café’s programming accordingly.

The Café serves food to invite adults into a space that looks quite different than on-campus student supports. Offering food in an inviting location helps establish trusting relationships between students and Café staff, a sense of belonging for those feeling “outside” the state’s college system, and recognizes the importance of self-care for adults who may lack food security. The Café also provides an accessible, culturally responsive, and centralized advising process within its walls.

Not all challenges can be resolved at the Café, so relationships with institutional and community partners are essential. Fred spent many of his early days on campus meeting with staff from the student service departments, listening and learning about their work and its challenges. Fred continuously cultivates his relationships with entities on campus that serve the needs of adult students. He often serves as the bridge between students and institutional or community partners. With students, he takes time to listen, probe, and deeply understand their aspirations and needs as well as the emotional impact of the barriers they face. With institutional and community partners, he identifies people who can address specific concerns and takes time to explain the issue fully and co-create solutions.

Fred’s “customer service” orientation keeps students and partners engaged as they navigate complex issues presented by challenging policies and practices. Recently, a student thought his classes would be dropped from his roster because a grant did not come through and Fred relayed: “Once the scholarship coordinator responded back to me, I was able to forward a bit of the email on to him just to put his mind at ease.”



Fred's past experiences and connections have strengthened his success today at the Reconnect Café. In recruitment efforts to enroll adult students in the Promise Zone of Davidson County, Fred gathered the support of key community leaders to message their neighbors and constituents about available services and the benefits of a postsecondary credential or degree. His connections with faith-based leaders provided a new avenue to enroll adults in postsecondary education. Today, the Café has expanded from its original location on campus to include mobile cafes within communities and a trained cadre of Reconnect Ambassadors.

Fred loves talking about his approach to reconnecting students to learning. "What I say has an impact on what others do. I always imagine I am baking a double crust peach cobbler—it contains lots of love, peaches, sugar, and cinnamon. There is no recipe, you just do it. And you teach others to do it so they can enjoy the pie just as it should taste."

In a recent interview with Fred Frazier, he expounded on his catalyzing role in Nashville.

### **How do your personal strengths and values inform how you approach your work?**

"Today, all those skills I acquired in the Navy—when I helped those in lower ranks than me as a career counselor and as a technician instructing others—are part of my tool bag. My first step is to recognize what students bring to me and grab what I need from my tool bag—connecting students to community services, college services, the right majors, selecting the right classes. I make sure when students register for school they are in the right major and are tracking the job market and salaries, so they don't graduate wondering where to go from this point. I call myself a connector. I don't know it all, but I know who to reach to get assistance, including veteran services and learning specialists. I call myself wise—I expect my students to work hard toward their dreams, start where they are, and release those things in life that hold them back."

### **How do your connections with students keep you grounded in this work?**

"First, I always look at student data from our Reconnect Café system. You can't run away from the data; it will talk, tell you how proficient you are, and what is working. When I cannot get the data I need, I know how to find it.

"Sometimes, I want to know who in the Reconnect program didn't complete; I begin with the data and make personal outreach to students. I can call them each and gain the broader picture.

"There are also the personal connections with adult students that are essential in this work. When I am approached with the challenges or conflicts students experience—be they decisions about majors or issues with childcare—there is a lot of time spent listening and asking questions. At some point, I will ask, 'What does your heart tell you?' and we begin to map out options from there."

"I'm working with a student now who is majoring in childcare education after 16 years serving as a provider in a day care center and realized she does not want to keep doing this work for long. Through a series of conversations, we've talked about her experiences, her childhood, her passions, and I've introduced a range of options. This student is now energized and considering majors like occupational or physical therapy that build on her experience and resituate her in the early childhood ecosystem. By sharing her dream, I become a dreamer who can help her achieve it."

### **What keeps you going and sustains you?**

"What keeps me going is faith and trust in God. I pray every day to be a blessing to someone today. I've learned how to take this work upon me and how to release it—that is key. My faith says I have strength and power to help and I refuse to leave these waters."



## Alyssa Vine

Director of Adult Learner Initiatives and Communications, CUNY



ALYSSA VINE, NEW YORK, NY

*“The Network’s main objectives were to highlight and advocate for policy and practice change that could save students time and money and eliminate barriers to entering or returning to college. Over the past year, it has been exciting to see CUNY’s leadership carry forward the Network’s input and activate programs that address these issues. In 2020, CUNY passed a new policy that will expand and systemize the use of Credit for Prior Learning, which will help bring more working adults into CUNY’s colleges and accelerate their paths to degree completion.”*

At the City University of New York (CUNY), Alyssa Vine is committed to bringing together partners across the CUNY system to develop and implement new initiatives for adult learners. She champions initiatives that provide flexibility and unique supports, lowering barriers so adult learners can thrive. She helped elevate the needs of CUNY’s adult learner population in the university-wide discourse around Credit for Prior Learning (CPL), contributing to the creation of a new CPL policy that prioritizes equity, transparency, and opportunity for students. This policy offers standards and mechanisms for students to earn credits for college-level learning acquired outside the traditional classroom. Her approach involved thoughtful cultivation of relationships, partners, and champions across many stakeholders and departments to recognize adult students and their experience at CUNY.

Credit for Prior Learning at CUNY was conceived as a policy with great potential impact for student success, but throughout the policy development process—a multi-year, multi-faceted endeavor—there was a need for ongoing iterative engagement with college leaders, faculty, administrators, and students. Challenges included developing buy-in from all of these partners as well as new protocols and practices that meet standards for academic rigor, parity, workforce needs, and more. Framing the program as central to CUNY’s mission of access and social justice helped leaders like Alyssa bring partners together and build momentum for planning and implementation. Alyssa was critical in soliciting feedback from across CUNY and putting forth a policy that incorporated the shared goals and needs of the university community.

Alyssa helped nurture and elevate champions throughout the system, especially staff working on the ground at CUNY’s campuses, who can articulate the day-to-day needs of adult students and the progress being made when speaking to upper-level leaders, including college presidents and provosts. Alyssa’s work hinged on finding the right inroads for involving faculty and building relationships with other administrators to ensure the design and implementation of CPL was relevant and beneficial to those enrolling in or returning to postsecondary education. Ultimately, Alyssa partnered with provosts, registrars, senior leaders in academic policy and workforce development, and others across the CUNY system who helped her develop and write the new policy and supporting materials.



The path to CPL is just one example of how CUNY is utilizing policy development and systems change to advance access and social justice for New York adults without a college degree. Alyssa points to the university's new debt-forgiveness program—launched this past summer as part of CUNY's response to COVID-19 circumstances and other life upheavals impacting its students—as another transformative initiative started in her department and advanced through interdepartmental and cross-campus efforts to understand and dismantle critical barriers to access and retention.

Alyssa Vine recently shared her approaches to catalyzing change across CUNY's large urban system.

### **How do your life experiences inform your approach to change?**

"I had lived in New York City for nearly a decade when I started working at CUNY six years ago. Since then, working at the university has transformed my understanding of the city and the layered problems that exist here. I've come to really appreciate CUNY and the role that it can play in addressing New York's most pressing issues. In my work, I try to channel this perspective by finding the right inroads and collaborators across the university to help unpack system challenges and reimagine equitable solutions."

### **How have you seen students benefit from your catalyzing work?**

"Sometimes we have to settle for incremental changes. Sometimes, just discovering the right question to ask or bringing together unlikely partners for a preliminary meeting can feel like a victory. This was very much my experience with CUNY's Adult Degree Completion Network, which set out to improve the way the university works for adult learners in terms of equity and access. The Network's main objectives were to highlight and advocate for policy and practice change that could save students time and money and eliminate barriers to entering or returning to college.

"Over the past year, it has been exciting to see CUNY's leadership carry forward the Network's input and activate programs that address these issues. In 2020, CUNY passed a new policy that will expand and systemize the use of Credit for Prior Learning, which will help bring more working adults into CUNY's colleges and accelerate their paths to degree completion. And just this past August, CUNY announced the 'CUNY Comeback Program,' a \$125M debt-relief program that will impact at least 50,000 students, ending the practice of withholding transcripts, and opening new doors for pursuing employment and educational opportunities."

### **What keeps you going and sustains you?**

"Among my colleagues in the Adult Degree Completion Network, we often talk about how change in the best interest of adult learners is really in the best interest of all students. Any student, at any time, may experience personal upheaval that jeopardizes their ability to persist and succeed on their educational trajectory. COVID made this abundantly clear, and over the past 18 months it has been inspiring to see CUNY recognize and act on the imperative to become a university system that is more flexible, more understanding of extenuating circumstances, and nimbler in its approach to supporting students. These were fundamental goals of the adult learner work, and witnessing this progress gives me a lot of hope for what else CUNY can accomplish."



# COMMON CHARACTERISTICS OF CATALYSTS

We interviewed 70 stakeholders working in postsecondary policy and practice change efforts, and observed that Catalysts bring a unique disposition and draw from a mix of lived and professional experiences in their work. We have identified several common characteristics among them:



## They are pluralistic thinkers.

Catalysts have a deep understanding of how policy or practice change happens at multiple levels and are guided by systems thinking. Their work involves operational expertise as well as aspirations to advance a broader strategy or vision. In operational mode, Catalysts excel at building working relationships, adapting messages, and deeply engaging with the distinct culture, responsibilities, and assets of their colleagues, partners, and/or students. In strategic mode, they understand their role as part of something bigger that requires momentum. They are often skilled at articulating the necessary interdependencies within an institution, across partners, and with the community to help realize the collective vision for equitable change that improves student rates of success.



## They identify where their power lies.

Catalysts can hold a variety of positions or roles in postsecondary change efforts. Their approach to the work may not perfectly fit their job description or level of power. Some catalysts hold **positional power**—their job equips them with resources or decision-making authority to set or activate broad change. They likely have access to stakeholders to help identify needs, connect resources to those needs, and propel action. However, many Catalysts do not hold or rely upon positional power alone. Those with **personal power** draw on their strengths, confidence, and competence—acquired through years of experience and visionary capabilities—to engage individual stakeholders to forge a path for change. One visionary catalyst shared, “I’ve always taken this approach, and I’ve learned it through my years of experience: It is ‘the sandwich approach’ you need: to help create the groundswell move and leadership matters, too.” Catalysts also exercise **relational power**, developing trust with and among a broad network of players internal and external to postsecondary institutions. Even in environments that are highly siloed and disconnected, Catalysts with relational power will sense and build up the necessary interdependencies across partners.



## They are driven by their passion.

Catalysts are passionately committed to pursuing and taking bold action. They are driven by personal values that are often rooted in lived experiences that encourage them to give back and offer students what they missed in their own educational journeys. They expect to encounter some partners and staff who are opposed to or threatened by change, but their values provide a stabilizing resilience in the face of barriers that others might perceive as impenetrable. They know when flexibility and creative solutions are needed, and when to stay the course to pursue a difficult change that challenges cultural norms, long-standing policies, or power structures.



# COMMON STRATEGIES AND TACTICS OF CATALYSTS

Through interviews with 70 individuals across Talent Hubs engaged in policy and practice change, we found that Catalysts were often key to change efforts—working outside the prescribed boundaries of their job title and positional power. Below are three strategies, with tactics, used by Catalysts to achieve their goals.

## **Strategy: Serve as trusted connectors and forge new connections**

Catalysts draw on their extensive knowledge and network of relationships to co-imagine new ways of working and communicating that break down barriers to access for students. Their past experiences and emotional intelligence help them uncover where unaddressed needs and barriers lie, observe when partners are ready for an energizing boost to their work, or where new connections can be built. They develop deep and trusting relationships that foster mutual benefits in the short and long term. Tactics often include:

- Connecting students to resources, expertise, and advice to help them attain a degree or credential.
- Facilitating honest and hard conversations between faculty and students that advance a broader understanding of barriers and aspirations.
- Showing up and following through for students and community members in ways that are beneficial, and not extractive or transactional.
- Articulating interdependencies between institutions and departments that are critical to the student success journey.
- Garnering resources for student-led annual events, social media, and associations to develop awareness campaigns and advocate for changes on campus.

## **Strategy: Position individuals with lived and professional expertise to contribute to and advance the work**

Catalysts recognize when they do not have the expertise, tools, or knowledge to meet new challenges presented by students, colleagues, or partners. They seek outside inspiration, resources, and ideas, and position individuals with lived and/or professional expertise to contribute to change efforts. When it is needed, they share or distribute power through a variety of tactics, such as:

- Contracting with industry experts to lead conversations and generate solutions among academic, workforce, and employer partners.
- Positioning residents on a working or steering committee to co-develop strategies, materials, and decisions for institutional policy change.
- Creating committees that combine perspectives and inform decisions from executive, management, student-facing staff, and students.
- Limiting their role to allow those closest to implementation to lead planning and design of new programs or policies.



### **Strategy: Model collective purpose and contribute to momentum**

Catalysts may not always have externally recognized or positional power to lead collective work toward broad goals. However, they demonstrate leadership by committing to the goals agreed upon by partners through their work and in relationships with others. Their tactics include:

- Requesting and using data, to make it accessible to all.
- Creating consistent lines of communication to staff, faculty, and partners who can review, voice ideas, and help refine new policies.
- Testing and piloting ideas that advance collective goals in their work, or the work of their department.

### **ADAPTING TO A CHANGING LANDSCAPE**

Flexibility in approach is critical to Catalysts, and the COVID-19 pandemic only reinforced its importance. Postsecondary policy and practice efforts can suffer setbacks—reductions in funding, climate-related disasters that require immediate attention, losing partners who are leading change. Catalysts recognize challenges as inflection points, and they adapt their approaches accordingly:

- Frequently checking in with students and partners to understand emerging challenges in a crisis—for example, at the beginning of the pandemic lockdown
- Leveraging carefully built relationships, partner agreements, and artifacts (such as memoranda of understanding, data sharing agreements, or guided pathway maps) to withstand moments of uncertainty.
- Setting new priorities that address the current context, even if they challenge or undo past work.
- Braiding various sources of funding to keep the work afloat.
- Advocating for implementation of new policies and practices when the environment/context changes and opportunities for new policies and practices emerge.



# CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Catalysts work hand in hand with institutional colleagues, students, and multi-sector partners to advance equity in postsecondary education. In this section, we highlight the markers of change that are invigorating the three Catalysts featured in this report to continue their work on behalf of students of color, adult, first generation, and low-income students. We also provide a set of implications for those supporting or leading efforts in postsecondary education and equity.

## Key Successes

Below are some of the key accomplishments of communities with pluralistic, powerful, and passionate Catalysts in their mix.

**Columbus, IN:** In recent years, EcO Network partners realized several successes.

- More than 100 employers have programs to support the educational attainment of incumbent workers.
  - » The Achieve Your Degree program underway at Ivy Tech Community College campuses (in Columbus, Madison, and Lawrenceburg/Batesville) increased engagement from 11 to 89 employers that now defer upfront costs of postsecondary education and provide full tuition remission for students earning a C or above.
  - » Support from the Department of Workforce Development's workforce education initiative was leveraged by adult education providers in the partnership (River Valley Resources, McDowell Education Center, and Jennings County Education Center) to build upskilling programs that combine customized training and industry-recognized certifications with 14 employers in the area.
- The expansion of an English Language Learning program, and an increase in bilingual coaching staff, helped students improve their English skills and enhanced their sense of belonging to the campus community.
- Educational attainment increased 8.1% between 2017 and 2021, with nearly 1,000 more students earning credentials in 2020 than in 2017.

**Nashville, TN:** Efforts to reconnect adults with postsecondary education is highly reliant on establishing partnerships in the community. The program in Nashville has partnerships with faith-based and nonprofit organizations, where members and participants, as well as their relatives and friends, are steadily referred to the Reconnect Café. More formally, partners now have trained Reconnect Ambassadors on site and at community events to spread opportunities that support adult learners.

The Nashville-based Reconnect Café is part of Tennessee's broader effort to engage adult students with some postsecondary experience through free tuition, flexible schedules, and culture changes in community colleges.



The statewide program is showing promising [early results](#):

- Average increase of 18% in adult enrollment in one semester
- Reconnect students earned one credit hour more than adults not in the program
- More than 2,000 adult students completed a certificate or degree in the first year

**New York City:** A collaborative leadership approach of the Adult Degree Completion Network (ADCN) has introduced a new model for system-wide collaboration that empowers each college in the CUNY system to provide honest, concrete feedback that shapes policy, practice, and systems change. The groundwork laid by the ADCN contributed to the development and approval of the university-wide Credit for Prior Learning policy and a dedicated office within CUNY. It helped frame, advocate for, and sustain crucial new support channels for adult students including retention grants, completion grants, and an expansive debt-forgiveness program.

## Implications

In this report, we highlight that individuals—Catalysts—are advancing equitable systems change in postsecondary efforts across the country. They may be hard to recognize by job title or responsibilities alone. However, the values, experiences, and relationships of successful Catalysts lead their partners and colleagues to develop deep trust and faith in their work. Once that trust is gained, individuals like Kathy, Fred, and Alyssa—and many others—find institutional and regional leaders not only asking them to coordinate or facilitate institutional change but asking them to identify the next big practice or policy issue to tackle. They often have deep insights into students, the operational side of policy and practice, as well as a vision driven by professional and personal mission. To ensure Catalysts in your institutional and community efforts are recognized, we offer these implications.

**For Postsecondary Partnerships.** Those involved in cross-sector, postsecondary success efforts rely on a range of visionary and committed actors with the power and creativity to move forward many incremental and systems-level changes. Following are considerations for how Catalysts can help advance these efforts.

- **Recognize Catalysts wherever they sit.** Catalysts may or may not hold powerful positions or executive titles. Instead identify those who are moving the work ahead through innovation and efforts that go beyond their named role. They can be seen helping to shape next steps to build momentum, identifying perspectives needed for the questions at hand, or volunteering to experiment with new ideas and reporting back to the group.
- **Elevate catalytic ways of working.** By recognizing catalysts publicly, partnership leaders can provide autonomy and encourage others to serve as Catalysts. Make space for others to try out catalyzing actions—to build new connections, become systems thinkers, and be adaptive as conditions change.
- **Protect Catalysts.** This kind of work requires collaboration, equitable distribution of tasks, and active engagement across partners; catalyzing efforts should never fall on one person regardless of how capable. Identify how each partner can engage in catalyzing activity that leverages their natural strengths or connections with others. Who is grounded in the community and able to engage on-the-ground perspectives? Who has a strong vision and can see the complexity of change needed at the systems level? Who has a strong intuition or the emotional intelligence to gauge the needs and the aspirations of others and help encourage their commitment to the effort?



**For Postsecondary Institutions.** Within universities and college systems, structures and job descriptions do not typically define or help identify Catalysts. Instead, Catalysts' work may be most visible to those they serve (e.g., students) or work closely with (colleagues). Here are considerations for identifying and sustaining Catalysts in institutions.

- **Honor the lived experiences.** Catalysts are guided by personal values and experiences that determine their approaches and keep them engaged through challenges and setbacks. Inviting people to bring more of themselves to work can make clear who is pursuing change above and beyond their job description to live out their values fully and advance institutional change.
- **Look for student-facing Catalysts.** Catalysts may be engaged with students as faculty or as student services professionals. They may not have a position or seat at decision-making tables that allow them to be seen or widely influential. However, they are often enmeshed in a network of people—sometimes on and off campus—who provide insight and direction that can be quite valuable to institutional policy and practice change. Invite them in to join leadership and advisory committees and leverage their grounded and expansive views of the institution.
- **Coach for catalysts.** It is not unusual to find staff who quietly go above and beyond their responsibilities, but it can be difficult to make their approaches visible to the institution and elevate their power in ways that serve as a model for others. Look for ways to identify catalysts throughout the institution and provide platforms for them to describe how they work and supports to help them advance their ideas further with additional resources, connections, and visibility.

Many thanks to Kathy Huffman, Fred Frazier, and Alyssa Vine for their contributions to this report and their continued catalyzing energy in their institutions and communities.

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